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The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film

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Abstract

This article proposes an investigation of the ways in which the figure of the non-person in/animate body operates in Gothic cinema. It will focus on human-like objects, specifically dolls, in order to investigate the key narrative and aesthetic discourses they facilitate regarding hollowness and life. These entities establish a frightening dynamic between stasis and real or imagined (yet always unwanted) movement. In the process, they become haunting symbols of liminality that articulate particular ideas about identity and personhood, while also stressing the permeable boundaries between self and other. Gothic things undermine the normal subject-object relation and thus continually destabilize the demarcations between life and death or sanity and insanity. In so doing, they furthermore expose an irrational attitude towards existence and consciousness. Using an object-oriented approach that draws on Elaine Freedgood's and Bill Brown's thing theory, I explore the disruptive tendencies that in/animate agents foster in such films as Maria Lease's *Dolly Dearest* (1991), Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965), and Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). I will focus on these case studies to examine the manner in which Gothic dolls activate uncanniness to represent subjectivity in crisis. In analyzing the figure of the doll to investigate the uneasy relationship between human beings and human-like things, this paper contributes to the growing interest surrounding the role of objects in Gothic cinema.

Keywords:

Dolls; Gothic film; vivification; objects and things; personhood; human likeness

From its inception as a fiction mode, the Gothic has played on our greatest fears but also on our greatest hopes and fantasies. One such fear – and one such hope – relates to our eagerness to invest dead things with life. Over the years, many film narratives have explored this fearful desire and melded magic and murder, the marvelous and the melodramatic, conventionality and preternatural subversion. The artificially or supernaturally animated quickly became a recognizable trope in the Gothic and horror imagination, where inert things are often literally – or seemingly – vivified by being ascribed properties of the human. Each of the films I will be analyzing more closely represents a different approach to the image of the doll. The object's haunting stillness in *Bunny Lake*, for instance, contrasts with its unexpected and diabolical movement in the low-budget horror flick, *Dolly Dearest*. In turn, the anonymous face of the doll in these two productions is opposed to the unbearable likeness of the Baby Jane doll and the protagonist of Aldrich's film.

Gothic literary and visual (including cinematic) culture has relied on the vivification of still objects as a means to expose and explore the powerful excesses that lie beneath the surface of the apparently organized, constant, controlled, and controlling socio-political parameters that rule everyday life. Literary works are outside the scope of this article, but it is pertinent to emphasize the pervasiveness of the doll motif in a plethora of Gothic texts, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816), Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Wondersmith" (1859), Rainer Maria Rilke's "Frau Blaha's Maid" (1899), M. R. James's "The Haunted Dolls' House" (1923), and Daphne du Maurier's "The Doll" (1937). Several essays and short stories that revolve around dolls are also compiled in Kenneth Gross's *On Dolls* (2012) and Ellen Datlow's anthology, *The Doll Collection* (2015). These narratives construct the doll as suspicious, yet familiar. Gothic and horror films build on this same understanding of dolls as sublimely odd and oddly appealing, which makes them singularly suited to dramatize deep-seated human fears and anxieties, such as ageing (in *Baby Jane*), hyper-consumerism and the supernatural (in *Dolly Dearest*), and mental illness (in *Bunny Lake*). In this article, I propose an object-oriented approach into the ways in which the non-human in/animate body operates in Gothic cinema. My focus is therefore on objects – particularly the figure of the doll – rather than characters or plot,

and my aim is to analyze the disruptive potential of these life-like tri-dimensional bodies. The shared affinities between human and non-human-but-human-like objects are made more complex when the films engage in processes of dollifying, whereby human beings become increasingly doll-like, as happens in *Bunny Lake* and B*aby Jane*, as I will explain further along.

The ideas articulated in this article draw on two interconnected premises. First, that it is possible to read objects as having meaning beyond a given text, so that we can claim with Elaine Freedgood that ideas, namely social relations, lurk or hide in things; and second, that there is a powerful bond between persons and things, which places humans and objects in a state of constant tension (53-54, 56). Many critics have sought to explain the intricate relationship between subject and object during and since Victorian times according to different academic fields, such as commodity culture, cultural history, behavioral history, psychoanalytical theories, and most importantly for this article, thing theory. Freedgood coined the phrase, "Victorian thing culture," to describe "a more extravagant form of object relations than ours, one in which systems of value were not quarantined from one another" (8). "Thing culture," she asserts, "survives now in those marginal or debased cultural forms and practices in which apparently mundane or meaningless objects can suddenly take on or be assigned value and meaning . . . [and] be convincingly stripped of randomness" (8). Thing theory, as developed by Freedgood, Bill Brown, and other scholars, is also innovative in that it aims to comprehend the relations between subject and object beyond – or, at least, outside – the capitalist market system.

Bill Brown distinguishes between objects and things and claims that things assert their presence suddenly, like when a car stalls or we trip over a toy. This means that we begin to confront the *thingness* of objects when they stop working for us, that is, when they disturb the usual subject-object relation (3-4). This moment of interruption (of a dramatic change in our relationship to a given object) alters the normalized person-thing balance, in the sense that it forces us to experience the physical world in a different manner (Brown 3-4). Accordingly, the immediate ambivalence of seemingly animated objects poses fundamental questions about the relationship of subject to object and reality to unreality (or mimesis to imagination), challenging the stability of our habitual relationship with the inanimate world: amusement and admiration, on the one hand; repugnance, fear, and revolt on the other. Gothic films present to us a world of things – a world dominated by things, their strangeness and their uncanny power to entice us. But the relations between humans and things are neither comfortable nor sociable in the Gothic. Indeed, when confronted with actual or imaginary vivification (or with the possibility of future animation), we realize that qualities we once thought exclusive to human beings, such as agency and likeness, no longer serve or suffice to describe us accurately. The general implication here is that objects that present characteristics of living creatures allow us to ponder the possibilities, the limits, and the very nucleus of what it means to be human. This is a question to which Gaby Wood, Victoria Nelson, and Barbara Johnson keep returning in their studies of the figure of the doll and the automaton (Wood, *Living Dolls*; Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*; Johnson, *Persons and Things*). Agency in Gothic fiction, and fantastic stories more generally, is widely distributed between human and non-human entities, and with agency comes the question of intelligence (rational thinking). One of the reasons these objects appear so frightening in the Gothic is because we (and the characters) assume they have a will of their own and that their actions have a purpose.

As for likeness, the Gothic and horror imagination is populated by myriad monsters that are human-like but devoid of proper humanness, such as zombies, mummies, and Frankenstein's creature. In turn, the production of human-like robots that mimic the appearance of humans and the development of artificial intelligence have decidedly complicated matters further, making it all the more difficult to define clearly and unambiguously what it is that makes us human. The dehumanization of the human in favor of object (or non-human) vivification gained substantial prominence in eighteenth-century "it-narratives," also known as "object tales" or "novels of circulation," such as *Chrysal; or Adventures of a Guinea* (1760) and *Adventures of a Hackney Coach* (1781). Jonathan Lamb explains that these are "surprisingly unkind" autobiographies of things and creatures where there is no benevolent intention towards human behavior. As Lamb observes, "In these stories, metamorphosis reveals one mode of being at odds with another; and sometimes when they find their voices, things and creatures use them not to admire and claim association with human beings but to report matters that humiliate and disgrace them, such as their avarice, delusion, cruelty, ugliness, and mortality" (Lamb 193). These fictions show, usually in the first person singular, how metamorphoses between the human and nonhuman destabilize personal identity. In fact, the tales not only depersonalize the human self, but moreover present non-humans as the voices of reason and the guardians of moral decency. Humans are exposed for their neglect and hypocrisy, their subjecthood unceremoniously usurped by things in search of revenge. Ultimately, the propensity of humans to ascribe human-like qualities to things is problematic because, as Kathleen Richardson notes, "it locates humans as the main agent in relations with materialities and non-humans" (121-22). In line with eighteenth-century "it-narratives," it is precisely this idea of human superiority that

Gothic and horror toy with and deconstruct.

Johnson elaborates on the specificities of the human and comments on the importance of exploring the category of "non-person" separately from that of "thing." She asks, "Are human-like objects (statues, for example) altogether like computers in their inanimateness? Are dead bodies inanimate in the same way that something that was never animate is?" (2). These are pertinent questions that point to the need for distinguishing between different categories of objects and analyze more thoroughly the intricacies pertaining to each type. Following on from Johnson's observation, we can subdivide animate and inanimate bodies into two large groups: "non-person" and "thing." Each of these can be subsequently divided into two subcategories. "Non-person animate bodies" concern, on the one hand, the human-likeness of the non-human – a subcategory comprised of human-like objects (such as androids and mechanical dolls) – and, on the other, the human-likeness of the no-longer-human; in other words, dead bodies (such as resurrected mummies, zombies, and ghosts), or what Richardson calls "models of non-human personhood" (110). Animate things, in turn, encompass non-human-like automata and haunted objects, such as the aurally alive mirror that speaks in Jean Cocteau's hauntingly eerie *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) or the "Fat Lady" portrait in the Gothically-inclined *Harry Potter* films (Figure 1).

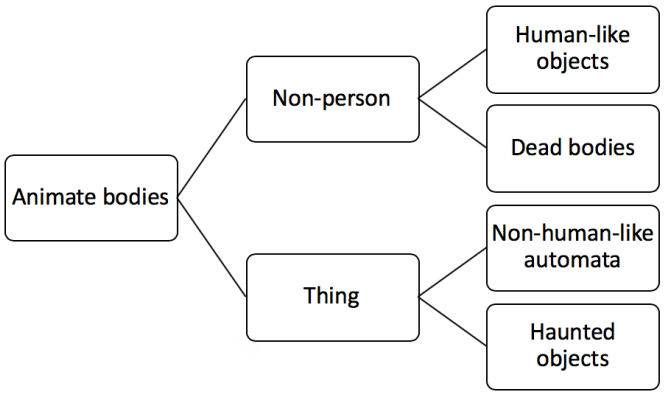

Figure 1: Taxonomy of animate bodies.

When we move to an analysis of "non-person inanimate bodies," which are the focus of my investigation, we have the same two subgroups as with animate bodies – human-like objects (puppets, dolls, dummies, marionettes, simulacra, waxworks, statues, effigies, death masks, and mannequins) and dead bodies (preserved corpses, pickled punks, skeletons, morgue bodies, and other post-mortem body imagery). Inanimate things are also organized into two subgroups: objects/curiosities (ancient swords, portraits, Ouija boards, antique jewelry) and dead animals, which become things through taxidermy (Figure 2).

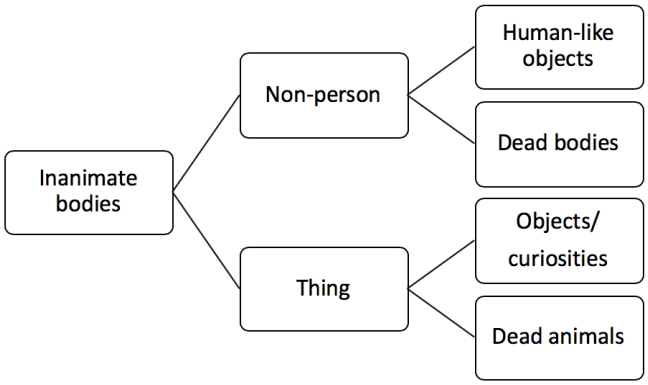

Figure 2: Taxonomy of inanimate bodies.

The taxonomy of animate and inanimate bodies I propose here retains Johnson's idea that we should differentiate between non-persons and things but, importantly, it does not establish an unbridgeable gap between the two categories and their respective ramifications. In accordance with Brown, it concedes that the status of objects can evolve and that human-like objects can become things when they have been damaged or destroyed and we can no longer immediately (or unproblematically) perceive our likeness in them. This categorization also allows for mobility between animate and inanimate conditions, as in the case of puppets, marionettes, and dummies, whose animation in the Gothic is, contrary to the horror genre, usually wholly dependent on human action. In what follows, I concentrate on non-person in/animate bodies that have become part of our cultural heritage, specifically the figure of the doll – an object that has long captivated filmmakers working with Gothic and horror tropes who have capitalized on the idea that human-like objects do a highly idiosyncratic job of rendering the human world.

A Brief History of Dolls

Historically, dolls and other playthings have been in existence for thousands of years, although social and cultural attitudes towards their function have changed considerably. In museums all over the world, we find Egyptian paddle dolls made from wood or clay, terracotta dolls from Greece, rag dolls from Roman times, and depictions of dolls in Renaissance paintings. Over the 1800s, propelled by the Industrial Revolution, doll-making became an important industry in England, France, and Germany. After the end of World War I, the United States became leaders in doll production by crafting more durable dolls made from leather, celluloid, and rubber that did not require the importation of porcelain. The most significant changes in doll production, however, took

place during the Victorian era, a time when the wellbeing and legal rights of children started to attract public attention, and childhood, as Ginger S. Frost observes, became the subject of much political debate (4-10). With the recognition of children as part of the consumer public, Victorian England saw the emergence of a new cultural space allotted to playthings and the development of a mass market for toys. Dolls of this period had realistic features and were made from a variety of materials such as cloth, wood, papier-mâché, wax, and porcelain. The latter were particularly popular in wealthy households and were generally not intended for playing with but rather to be looked at. These delicate porcelain dolls would become the archetypal dolls of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Gothic fiction, as featured in *Bunny Lake*, *Baby Jane*, and John R. Leonetti's *Annabelle* (2014). Victorian-era dolls, as Gary Cross notes, "possessed adult bodies and faces," and the traditional function of doll play was the implicit preparation for adulthood and its socially-mandated gender roles (28). As the toy industry developed, so did the features of the doll which grew more and more realistic and childlike (Stover 27). The culmination of this process was Benjamin F. Lee's manufacture of rubber dolls from 1837.

When we turn to cinema, we notice that Gothic and horror dolls are, in general, physically homogenous and so the films, with few exceptions, do not reflect the actual changes playthings have gone through over the centuries in terms of production materials or facial features. Some horror films do use plastic dolls (the *Child's Play* franchise, for instance), but for the most part Gothic and horror productions adhere to the standard figure of the old porcelain doll. This preference evidences a close proximity to Gothic literature and Victorian society by establishing a direct link with the plaything of choice of many well-off Victorian families. The dainty faces of these dolls and their frail bodies are imprinted with the idea of childhood innocence, which Gothic and horror are quick to taint, subvert, and destroy. Delicateness metamorphoses into subtle evilness, and the doll becomes too lifelike, too realistic. A relevant detail to understand the significance of the object's cultural history to Gothic film, namely the choice to privilege certain doll-making materials, is the fact that Gothic dolls rarely appear fully undamaged, their physiognomy vividly displaying the corruption caused by human manipulation and the passage of time. In this way, they act as constant reminders of the fragility, forlornness, and ephemerality of life. The presence of the antique doll in modern Gothic works also emphasizes an inescapable Gothic theme: the overwhelming pervasiveness of the past within the present; more specifically, the unfailing ability of the past to deeply affect narrative reality. Because of its production history, the vintage doll mediates pastness and willful anachronism, whereas its recurring presence in Gothic narratives materializes the idea of the ever-returning past. The fact that the films have continually used dolls of the old-fashioned kind to haunt their viewers may appear paradoxical, in that Gothic and horror are widely analyzed as commenting on the times that produce them. In this sense, at the same time as the use of and focus on these objects points to their history, Gothic and horror also de-historicize them. By playing with anachronism, they sever, to a certain extent, the relations of the thing to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century societies that they are deemed to mirror. Looked at in this way, an object stuck in time might not provide such an obvious or fruitful avenue for thing theorists or commodity culture specialists, but it does not necessarily limit the meanings or legibility of the object. It calls, in fact, attention to the power of specific things (of specific commodities) to affect contemporary subjects in a way that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Uncanniness and the Gothic Doll

Let's face it: some dolls are creepy. I am not referring to the Barbie type of doll, although these, too, have had their fair share of disturbing features. In 1975, for instance, Mattel released a Skipper doll that could grow her breasts when you rotated her arm. But this is not the kind of disturbing I am interested in here. What concerns me is the type of creepiness Susan Yi Sencindiver addresses when she writes, "Whether of porcelain, vinyl, or cloth, a sexual surrogate or an object of a child's caress, divine icon, fetish, or voodoo curse, or assuming its notorious revengeful appearance in horror fiction and film, the doll in its various permutations is endowed with a unique auratic presence susceptible of acquiring an uncanny hue" (103). I have hinted at this earlier, but how exactly does it happen? When does a doll, an object, become uncanny? Jentsch claims that things that are ambivalently animate and inanimate trigger the uncanny – a state of unease and fear – when they go against our intellectual expectations and desires, breaching the boundaries between human and machine, life and death, mobility and stillness (11-14). Freud, in turn, focuses on the self's psychic past, arguing that the uncanny arises due to the return of childhood memories that have been repressed, but also due to the return of primitive human beliefs, such as animism. In the fictional world, Freud notes, the ambivalence as to whether narrative events are real or imaginary constitutes a source of uncanny feelings (219-252). Johnson, in her enquiry into humankind's relationship with simulacra, writes that a "remainder of the uncanniness of *unwanted* life . . . occurs when one wishes a being dead and it exhibits life: the unsettling persistence of the doll Chucky in the *Child's Play* movies, for example" (164). What is uncanny, then, is what goes against one's waking wishes or beliefs. As Johnson re-

marks, "it is not uncertainty over something's aliveness that Freud says is uncanny, it is its contradiction of our wishes" (164).

Object-related uncanniness in horror films originates from actually witnessing unwanted animation, as when *Dolly Dearest's* Marilyn confronts the evil doll whose hellish spirit is controlling her daughter, Jessica, and it speaks back. In the Gothic horror film, *The Boy* (William Brent Bell, 2016), the uncanny manifests differently. Greta is hired by an elderly couple to look after their son, Brahms, who turns out to be a porcelain doll. Greta, whose initial reaction at the sight of her charge was laughing in utter disbelief, slowly changes her demeanor and gives in to the possibility that the doll may be capable of agency. Brahms repeatedly turns up in unexpected places, for instance, and some of Greta's belongings mysteriously vanish. Importantly, Greta's acquired fear is the result of *un*witnessed (and, therefore, only suspected) animation. Uncanniness, in this case, appears when the audience and the characters believe an object has (or might have) agency and its supposedly imminent animation is not desired. In short, the Gothic uncanny is not dependent on vivification, but on its possibility. In addition, and going back to Brown's thing theory, the uncanny seems to settle only when the objects stop working and/or call attention to themselves, thus becoming things for the characters.

Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori's theories contribute to further the discussion around uncanny humanoid bodies by arguing that two factors – affinity and appearance – need to connect in human-like entities; otherwise, the object gives rise to a sense of the uncanny (98-99). Human-like automata aspire to be perfect copies of human beings. A prosthetic hand or a robot, for instance, that appear lifelike but fail to act – to behave or to move – like a human being fall into what Mori calls the "uncanny valley" by provoking negative familiarity, repulse, and fear (98-99). This is where dolls come into play. We recognize in them a certain human likeness (which varies depending on the type of doll), but their glassy stares and immobile bodies provoke negative familiarity or affinity. This culminates in a changed relation between object and human subject, which ties in with Brown's arguments about how objects become things. The negative familiarity that thingifies objects is obvious in horror productions involving dolls, such as *Dolly Dearest* or Tom Holland's *Child's Play* (1988), in which both Dolly and Chucky have human attributes – physical appearance, speech, intent – but are nonetheless distinctly non-human. In altering the typical order of things and almost dissipating the fundamental difference between subjecthood and objecthood, the doll comes to occupy the space of the uncanny valley, that frightening and mysterious realm of the eerily lifelike where humanoid objects, despite their familiar appearance, do not behave in a proper human-like manner. Briefly, the disparity and disconnection between our expectations of human behavior from the simulacrum and its inability to act accordingly gives rise to a sense of uncanniness. Mori's theory calls attention to the quest for wholeness, that is, for a perfect balance between appearance and behavior that would transfer the properties of the human to the simulacra. This would create a potentially dangerous symbiosis between the two, ultimately leading us to redefine our perception and our notion of what "human" means.

Creepiness and scariness are built into the doll, and these feelings guide the interactions of the characters with the physical world. Human-like avatars of the odd and the weird, these paradoxically unresponsive, yet undead, entities that foreclose the possibility of impending re/animation, become haunting symbols of liminality. Their "categorical interstitiality," to use Noël Carroll's expression, adds to both the unease with which they are perceived in film and the particular uncanny experience they produce (55). Carroll associates this idea of "impurity" with interstitial and/or contradictory entities that are both living and dead or that conflate the animate and the inanimate (55). In this regard, the fear of Gothic dolls relates directly to their liminal half-existence, specifically the idea that they always seem to be on the verge of moving and revealing agency. Sencindiver remarks upon the doll's peculiar hold over the characters and writes that the strangeness it excites pertains to "the suspicion of a doll's furtive inner life" (103). Brahm's supposed "inner life" in *The Boy*, for example, constitutes a powerful threat that destabilizes Greta's daily routine and eventually leads her to question her own sanity. In the Gothic game of people versus objects, the latter often stand victorious. Ultimately, the uncanny almost-aliveness of anthropomorphic things is terrifying in the Gothic because accepting that the motionless can become mobile means accepting the existence of a residual degree of inexplicable agency in lifeless matter; in other words, it means accepting the existence of a residual degree of inexplicable autonomy in evil.

Gothic Stillness and Horrifying Vivification

Just as the contours of uncanniness, in terms of attributing sensory functions of living organisms to non-person bodies, vary from the Gothic mode to the horror genre, so does the extent to which things impact the characters and the viewers. The Gothic and horror cinematic traditions rely on the power of objects to provoke an affective reaction in the viewers, to incite them and draw them in. They produce narratives that deconstruct the ordinariness of everyday things by making them disturbing and foreign to both the audience and the characters. Specifically, the borderline agency of certain objects constitutes a powerful device for defamiliariz-

ing normality, in that it invites human beings to ponder the possibility of humanized non-humans. In a way, creepy doll narratives seem to answer humankind's age-old desire to create artificial life. That desire's inescapable corollary, however, is the fear that things might momentarily break away from their entrancing entropy and actually cross the threshold between the living and the lifeless. In horror films, as we have seen, that fear becomes a fact, and the norm is to have objects supernaturally endowed with life. These living constructs take over the narrative, and their sole purpose is to haunt (and harm) their human counterparts with remorseless cruelty, like Chucky from the *Child's Play* franchise or the haunted doll collection from Stuart Gordon's *Dolls* (1987). An earlier example of horrifying animation is Lewin Fitzhamon's now lost trick film *The Doll's Revenge* (1907). The *British Film Catalogue's* plot summary for the film reads, "Boy breaks sister's doll and it mends, grows, tears him up, and eats him" (Gifford 55). When objects come to life in horror films such as these, they invariably become malevolent agents working against the characters. In *Dolly Dearest*, an American family acquires a Mexican doll factory, located next to a dig site. When an archaeologist breaks into an ancient tomb, he inadvertently releases a satanic spirit, which finds refuge inside some of the dolls in the factory, including the one young Jessica chooses to take home. The sequence where Camilla, the unsuspecting housekeeper, walks through a dark basement crammed with shelves of fake eyeballs and other doll parts encapsulates the violence perpetrated by vivified objects in horror films. Shortly after she turns on the light and inspects her surroundings, the camera cuts to a close-up shot of child-like hands slowly locking the basement door and then to Dolly's tiny feet menacingly approaching. At the sight of the devilish creature, the housekeeper screams and falls backwards down the stairs. In the moments that follow, there is more chaos and screaming. Generalized panic is the prototypical reaction of horror characters to unwanted animation.

Preminger's Gothic noir-ish thriller, *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, presents a rather different approach to objects. Halfway through the film, in a sequence structured somewhat similarly to the one in *Dolly Dearest*, Ann, the tormented Gothic heroine, goes down a flight of stairs into the "recuperation ward" of a cluttered doll hospital. She is looking for a doll belonging to her daughter Bunny, who has mysteriously vanished and whose very existence is being questioned. The dramatic lighting, with Ann carefully shining a kerosene lamp across shelf after shelf, anxiously perusing each doll, adds a distinctively suspenseful "haunted house" feel to the mise-en-scène. Preminger's hand-held camera and tracking shots in the shop's basement frame Ann alongside the eerie dolls, positioning the character as one of those broken glassy-eyed objects. This foreshadows Ann's forced admittance into St. Charles Hospital – like Bunny's doll, she is broken and needs to be fixed. The use of the word "hospital" in relation to both animate and inanimate characters points to another connection between lifelike playthings and human beings. Ann's psychological games toward the end of the film (slipping into the role of a little girl in an attempt to appease her deranged brother and save her daughter's life), illustrate the importance of the doll also as a symbol of childhood and trauma. In a narrative where up until the end it is hard to tell whether Bunny is real or not, the music-box type of tune that plays while Ann wanders the darkened, nightmarish basement suffuses the sequence with a dream-like quality that serves as counterpoint to the terrifying idea that those inanimate bodies are staring back at her. The possibility of uncanny animation culminates in Bunny's doll uttering the word, "mommy," when Ann finally finds it and picks it up. In the Gothic mode, then, the vivification of objects takes on strikingly different contours: as a rule, objects are only seemingly – which is to say, psychologically – endowed with agency, revealing the instability of personal identity (in this case, Ann's and her brother's). Horror, therefore, deals with non-person animate bodies, whereas the Gothic usually explores human-like inanimate objects. This means that, where dolls are concerned, the physical threats to the self are real in the horror film and imagined in the Gothic.

From these two sequences, we also realize that another aspect that separates Gothic from horror is the reaction of the characters towards these objects. Both films confront the viewer with varying levels of discomfort, associated, in the first one, with scattered human-like body parts and, in the second, with an overwhelmingly homogeneity. Repetition and sameness are the building blocks of uncanniness in the *Bunny Lake* sequence. In order for Ann to leave the doll hospital, she has to discern the individual qualities of a specific doll – she must search beyond the frightening clone-like homogeneity. There is no physical contact with the objects until she sees and reaches for Bunny's doll. Contrariwise, in *Dolly Dearest*, there are several moments of undesired and involuntary contact with things, namely when a shelf of doll heads collapses on the housekeeper, whom Dolly later stabs and electrocutes. The specificity that underlies the use of objects in Gothic cinema is related to an almost reverent concern for the world of things, so that the act of perceiving objects tends more towards a sort of sinister curiosity than visceral horror. The actual (visible) animation of the inanimate in horror films produces a type of reaction that is qualitatively different to the act of observing endless stacks of immobile dolls. The Gothic is therefore related to the perception of fear and its experience in the mind rather than to vicious and visual attacks to bodily integrity. In the Gothic imagination, dolls are scary simply because they are dolls;

their presence is enough to instill fear. Moreover, it is the camera itself that creates Gothicity by privileging the object and making it the focus of the action. Stanley Cavell remarks that, in a film, "a trivial thing easily becomes a mythical object, probing its own significance," in the sense that objects might acquire a particular aura and a chief narrative and scenic role (208). The Gothic, more so than horror, invites viewers to become enthralled by "trivial" objects that rapidly take on aesthetically and thematically central roles in the narrative, as evidenced through a series of specific cinematic techniques. In *Bunny Lake*, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds work in conjunction with camera movements and angles to create a pervasive feeling of suspense, strangeness, and displacement: there is hardly any room for the self amid the violent fixity of those cracked faces, dismembered bodies, and lifeless stares. The Gothic, then, relies more heavily on cinematic rather than narrative devices to generate fear and portray dolls as key emblems of corruption and the uncanny.

What we also understand from these examples is that Cavell's "mythical objects" quickly revert to the state of "things," in that they deeply affect the usually stable subject-object relationship by calling attention to themselves. In line with Brown's thing theory, we can argue that these dolls have become things because they have stopped working and need to be fixed (in Preminger's film, they are, tellingly, in a doll "hospital"). We look at damaged dolls differently, which alters our normal relationship with them. These "objects-becoming-things," to use Lesley Stern's expression, reveal a process during which subjects are de-animated while objects become animated (397). The broken dolls in *Bunny Lake* capture our attention in a way that Ann does not. She gazes at them seemingly anesthetized while the flickering light adds movement to the myriad doll bodies, which seem to gaze back. The empty glance of this object-become-thing provokes a reversal of roles, whereby humans, who usually gaze while objects are gazed at, suddenly become depersonalized, thing-like, relegated from subjecthood to objecthood. This change in perception is accompanied by a renewed negotiation of space that stresses the importance of the non-human. The camera seems to be trespassing the claustrophobic space of the doll hospital, which contributes to the creation of a daunting feeling of unwavering surveillance and gives the illusion that those tattered things have long appropriated the space of the repair shop. They appear as the true owners of the place, whereas the living characters seem to be no more than unwelcome guests whom those motionless bodies merely tolerate and with whom they are forced to cohabitate. About six years earlier, Roman Polanski had used similar devices in his short film *The Lamp* (1959). From the outset, the title highlights the significance of objects to the plot and immediately allocates them a crucial role in the negotiation of narrative space. The contrast lighting, paired with the recurring close-ups of broken dolls and an unusual use of sound, create a grim atmosphere of suspense and fear. Inside the doll shop where the action takes place, the camera privileges the objects and makes them the sole focus of the action, paying very little attention to the human character, an old doll maker. There is no dialogue, only non-diegetic music and ambient, onscreen sounds – a cuckoo clock striking the hour, the steady ticking of the clock, the noise of a door closing. The upbeat harpsichord melody gives way to a soft and disconcerting whispering about two-thirds into the film, after the doll maker closes the shop for the day. The way the camera moves from doll to doll seems to position these uncanny voices as coming directly from the human-shaped objects, disturbing the borders between visualized, acousmatic, and non-diegetic sound (Chion 71-74). The wavering light coming from the electric meter is projected onto the dolls, creating an illusion of movement, of animation. Moments later, a lamp suddenly bursts into flames and burns down the shop. The non-diegetic harpsichord music returns, and the crackling of the fire melds with the gentle whispers, which become progressively overlapping, as though all of the dolls were speaking at the same time. The whispering, it is worth noticing, comes about only after the doll maker upgrades from gas lighting to electricity, which establishes an interesting connection between the animation of Frankenstein's creature in Mary Shelley's novel and the aural liveliness of the dolls and doll parts. The image of the flames mercilessly consuming those helpless lifelike objects is, in turn, noticeably reminiscent of the fire that disfigured Prof. Jarrod and destroyed his beloved wax figures in André de Toth's *House of Wax* (1953). This film, in which a severely injured wax figure sculptor murders people and then uses their wax-coated corpses as museum displays, offers perhaps the most extreme example of how human and doll can become one, not only transgressing but effectively erasing the boundaries between self and object-other. In this case, the human body goes through a gradual process of dehumanization, whereby it becomes a non-person inanimate object; first, in its post-mortem condition (a corpse) and, then, in its transformation into a human-like object (a waxwork). More recently, cinematic techniques, such as the point-of-view shots of the possessed doll in *Dolly Dearest* and the long contemplative takes and close-ups that frame scary doll Annabelle in Leonetti's eponymous film, contribute to heighten the idea that inanimate things may be breathed to life. Dolly is even endowed with the ability to speak, which affords the object the inherently human capacity for articulate speech.

Each in their own way, the films I have analyzed so far affect the transformation of everyday household objects into "myth-

ical things," to play with Cavell's expression. Human-like objects in Gothic films are, therefore, manifestly yet subtly peculiar, and the camera stresses their singularity by ensuring that they are given an unusual narrative and aesthetic value within the storyline. In the end, one thing is certain – whether in Gothic or horror films, the supposed innocence of toys is challenged and ultimately destroyed. *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, as I will argue in the section that follows, plays with this idea – the destruction of innocence – and turns child play into distressful abjection.

Transpersonal Identity and the Dangers of Dollifying

Over the centuries, dolls have been used as instruments of socialization, but also to identify and cope with suffering and mental disorders, as in the modern-day use of therapy dolls. Gothic film narratives, such as *Bunny Lake*, have repeatedly focused on this use of the doll to articulate trauma and psychological problems, along with the idea that objects can shadow normative ideals of self and society. The complex innocence of the doll along with the subjective sense of its impending vivification interweave in a way that blurs the distinctions between psychological fear and metaphysical evil and, in that respect, between reason, imagination, and pathology. Indeed, as we have seen, the threat of thingly animation often lies within the self's own psyche, so much so that, in the Gothic imagination, dolls stand first and foremost as terrifying indicators of personal identity in crisis. Without wanting to fall into the scholarly trap of oversimplification by hastily reading the object as a visual metaphor for socio-cultural anxieties about the relations between people, that is, between the self and the other (in its many shapes), the doll discourse in the Gothic provides us with the tools to dissect a wide range of interrelated themes and tropes. The threats to personhood from within and without expose issues of self-identification and social dysfunction, while offering insights into the construction of agency and our collective imagination. More than a "weak metonym" for personal and social issues, the doll figures "first of all, itself" (Freedgood 3). It tells a story of human relations and of our interaction with our things; it tells a story of industrial production, where objects are put together by a series of anonymous hands. Gothic and horror films recurrently expose this transience and anonymity by presenting dolls that often have an unknown origin. This raises questions of ownership, namely regarding who the legitimate owner of the doll is. In this way, surrounding the object and its history is a feeling of uncertainty about origin, which, according to Jentsch, is one of the sources of the uncanny (10).

The concept of "dollifying" is helpful in understanding the nefarious implications that the confrontation of person and thing may entail in the Gothic. G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis observe that "animistic fancy" and the process of "dollifying" involve "ascribing more or less psychic qualities to the object, and treating it as if it were an animate and sentient thing" (132). In Gothic films, which share a vivid interest in issues pertaining to the frontiers between sanity and insanity, the process of dollifying does not happen as a result of child play. It generally has deeper implications and is used to reveal underlying psychological issues that affect adult characters. While dollifying is widely accepted as part of a child's normal development, it becomes worrisome when it carries on into adulthood. "To you, they are wax; but to me, their creator, they live and breathe," says the Professor in *House of Wax*. "Do you really hear what they say, Jarrod?", his associate asks him. "Of course!" he replies, reasserting the aliveness of his wax figures. From this exchange, we realize that Prof. Jarrod is engaging in a dangerous game of dollifying and is apparently unable to discern between what is real and what is not.

Throughout *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, the fluidity of the borders of the self grows increasingly visible. The film is about two rival sisters, one of which, Jane, lives in the past, longing for the fame and youth that will never be hers again – not unlike *Sunset Boulevard*'s Norma Desmond. In a pivotal sequence, Jane, alone in her living room, re-enacts one of her childhood successes, the signature song, "I've Written a Letter to Daddy." As she plays a few notes on the piano, a familiar *a capella* voice interrupts her and fills the sound track. It is her old childhood rendition of the maudlin song. The camera cuts to Jane's point of view, and, sitting in an armchair next to the piano, we perceive a life-size porcelain doll to which Jane begins to sing, resuming where the ghostly voice had left off. Much like in Polanski's short film, an acousmatic aural presence is paired with the image of the doll, so that the child's voice seems to emanate directly from it. In other words, Jane dollifies the object to such an extent that the ghostly song gains diegetic relevance and appears to transition from acousmatic to visualized sound. The charming voice and the doll's beautiful face make the object seem more alive – more animate even – than sad, grotesque Jane. The object in question was made to her image as a young child star and now stands as the other, as the self-become-other – the self-become-thing. Jane has grown up and gotten old. Time has changed and corrupted her body while the doll has remained in pristine condition.

The fateful likeness of the Baby Jane doll, advertised as an exact replica of Baby Jane Hudson, mitigates that feeling of uncertainty about origin that often surrounds Gothic objects but also complicates its strenuous relation to its owner. The serialized production of Baby Jane dolls, along with their subsequent distribution and consumption, anticipate the split identity of the pro-

tagonist, torn between different identities – Jane's disparate personalities, her childhood, and her sister's life. The othering of the self into an object produces an uncanny effect, for it represents the self as other and the other as the self. The familiar, thus, becomes foreign and vice-versa. In the living room sequence, self and other meld when Jane gets up from the piano, takes the bow from the Baby Jane doll's head and puts it in her own hair. The soundtrack adds to the haunting feeling of this moment by silencing the ghostly singing and allowing Jane's hoarse and broken diegetic voice to take over. The bow acts as a sort of hand-me-down that visually stresses the permeable boundaries between self and other, subject and object, while also pointing to the multi-layered and transpersonal properties of identity and personhood. The process of dollifying has gone too far, and old, child-like Jane becomes herself dollified. The binaries of childhood/adulthood and sanity/insanity are pushed to the extreme when Jane catches her reflection in a mirror and succumbs to the weight of time and memory with a horrified scream. Her living frame, violently counterposed to the doll's frozen temporality, is too painful to bear. Jane's encounter with her elderly self evokes Dorian Gray's reunion with his portrait at the end of Wilde's novel. The past wins over the present and insanity over sanity, as it so often happens in Gothic narratives. Jane loses herself to the other, embodied here by the uncanny self-otherness of the delicate, gently smiling doll. In this moment, the human simulacrum offers a commentary on the corruption of the character's personhood and presents the human body as the site of intersecting discourses about ageing, mental instability, and abject identity.

As represented in this sequence, Jane's downward spiral is unsettling, for it reveals the extent to which personal identity has been irreparably damaged and usurped by the other. It is telling that a substantial part of the film's opening credits is set against a Baby Jane doll lying on the ground with its head crushed, foreboding the psychological destruction of real-life Jane. The doll signals a disrupted (and disruptive) sense of selfhood and addresses identity as an open-ended process shaped by the interplay between animate self and inanimate thing. In the end, the journey of becoming other discloses the human capacity for (and proneness to) self-effacement and, by correlation, the ghostliness of the human condition as seen through a Gothic lens.

The Everlasting Appeal of Vivifying Human-like Objects

The history of the Gothic cannot be told without reference to its objects and, more pertinently, to their afterlives, that is, the story of the objects after they exit the commercial circuit and enter the private sphere of the characters' lives. Signaling a key encounter between the strange and the familiar, Gothic objects are disturbingly conspicuous and their mere presence affects the characters. Furthermore, they often become ideological tools in dissecting the socio-cultural and psychological issues that govern the lives of their owners. Through the image of the doll, Gothic narratives are able to exteriorize the inner conflicts between the real and the magical or the imaginary, diagnosing a recurring tendency towards abjection, self-hate, and self-destruction. Simply put, vivified things in the Gothic often express cultural anxieties about the human body and the human mind, their limits, and their vulnerability to outside influences.

Over the centuries, our frightening fascination with animism and anthropomorphism has originated terrifying narratives of transgression, depravity, doubling, madness, and monstrosity. One of Gothic film's most familiar narrative devices since Georges Méliès's experiments with trick photography, the animation of inanimate objects retains a perennial appeal. Film offers the possibility to bring to life popular tropes which have been around since, at least, the publication of Pygmalion's myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* circa 8 AD (Naso). From Méliès's animation of a statue in *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1898) to *The Golem* (1915; 1920) or *Homunculus* (1916), and from *Toy Story* (1995) to *Corpse Bride* (2005), Gothic and horror have vehemently rejected Cartesian dualism and privileged an animistic worldview where humanoid toys come to life, innocent-looking dolls suddenly spark with malice, dummies speak of their own accord, and automata rebel against their creators. In this way, seemingly vivified human-like objects have shaped the moral and aesthetic economy of Gothic narratives by articulating the trope of a threat to personhood and self-identity from a remodeled human form. Television shows, such as *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), have carried on the Gothic tradition of depicting frightening inanimate dolls and dollifying women.

Gothic film feeds on humanity's preoccupation with unwanted, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable animation. The strange, archaic worlds of puppets, dolls, dummies, and other playthings collide with our own and rearrange our place in the inanimate object world. The digital era, with gaming and virtual reality, where anthropomorphic objects might not be physical things at all, provides yet another commentary on humanity and our endless capacity (and desire) to re/animate it. The development of increasingly mediated online identities via social media, like Snapchat and Instagram, has enabled us to make dolls and puppets out of our selves, exposing our ever-present obsession with doppelgängers and fragmented or displaced identities. The result is a continual redrawing of the boundary between human, non-human, object, and thing, and our redefinition of the nature of life

and agency, good and evil. For all their motionless yet ubiquitous presence, animate/inanimate things ultimately present postmodernity as haunted, personhood as a volatile concept, and reality as a work always under construction.

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